

I live and breathe...\*\* Duane Hanson's hyper- - Morning Call, The (Allentown, PA) - October 29, 2006 - page E1

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"Duane Hanson: Real Life," on display at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, has been very popular with visitors young and old, but it has been sort of hard on Officer Jack.

"People have been doing all sorts of weird stuff," says Jack Emerson, a security guard at the Museum. "They come right up to you and stare at you if you stand still too long. They keep wanting to touch it [the art] ... one lady tried to touch me!"

It's not a mass insanity afflicting the patrons of the museum. Such behavior is all part of the norm for a Duane Hanson exhibit. Hanson (1925-1996) rose to fame in the 1960s and 1970s as a master at hyper-realist sculpture. His sculptures are so lifelike that it really is easy to mistake them for real people, and vice-versa.

"The story of how Hanson got discovered is an interesting one," says museum director and exhibition curator Bruce Katsiff. "Hanson was teaching at Miami Dade Community College. At the time he was doing much more overtly shocking sculptures of things like police riots, anti-war riots, strong in-your-face work."

A controversy over a particularly controversial sculpture entitled "Abortion," which depicted a young pregnant girl on a table covered in a white linen sheet, resulted in Hanson being banned from making sculptures in the school. This unusual measure, and the surrounding controversy, got the attention of Ivan Karp, director of the trendy OK Harris Gallery in New York. "Karp was jurying a sculpture exhibit," Katsiff explains, "and he became so taken with Hanson's work that he invited him to New York."

The Hanson family moved north and within days, Duane was a star. A Life Magazine photographer happened to be at the OK Harris Gallery and captured the strange image of a man wheeling what appeared to be a frozen person into the gallery. The photograph was published across the country. "And suddenly there is an enormous attention to [Hanson's] work," Katsiff says.

What made the native of rural Minnesota most famous, however, were his figures of everyday people such as cleaning staff, housepainters, children or the elderly. These are the sculptures in "Real Life" -- 15 of them, along with 43 of Hanson's photographic studies and two landscape paintings. There is a security guard, a cheerleader, a man on a lawnmower. Most are in the museum's lower level, but a few are placed in unusual and clever places. The effect of this, no doubt intentional, is to additionally confuse the museum's patrons, to further blur the line between art and audience.

Each sculpture is so detailed, so exact, so lifelike that even though museum guests know exactly what they are getting into, they are still fooled.

Wesla Hanson, the artist's wife, who organized the exhibit with the Michener Museum, has seen

the type of behavior reported by Emerson many times. She likes to tell the story relayed to her by a collector in Oregon who owns the sculpture named "Dishwasher."

"A security guard noticed 'someone' inside the house and called the police," she says. "The police showed up with their guns drawn, only to be told that the intruder was a work of art."

Wesla, who lives in Florida, also likes to tell the story of how her late husband's involvement in the "Art in Embassies Program" fooled a certain head of state. According to Anita B. McBride, deputy assistant to the president, George W. Bush was awakened at the Paris Embassy Residence to receive some important information. "On his way down the stairs," says McBride, "he was startled to see a young girl sitting on the floor. Of course, she was Mr. Hanson's wonderful "Child with Puzzle."

"Child with a Puzzle," made in 1978, is one of many of Hanson sculptures in which he used friends and family as models, including his children Maja and Duane. Museum Guard (1975) has the head of Wesla Hanson's uncle. Hanson himself is one of the models in the appropriately titled "Self Portrait with Model."

Although Hanson's work elicits laughter and wonder, it also has a very serious message.

"Duane felt that the average working-class person was weighed down by the everyday worries of his life," says Wesla. "And he reflected this in his sculptures."

There isn't a smile to be seen; some of the sculptures seem absolutely desperate in their sadness. Wesla says her husband was not a melancholic person, but rather was "a very sympathetic person [who was] very serious about his feelings for humanity."

Hanson's process was painstaking. First, models were photographed. Then, using a process known as "lifecasting," several casts were made. He poured molds of various materials such as fiberglass or Bondo (automobile filler) and then assembled the pieces into a stunningly accurate human form.

The next step was even more painstaking, as Hanson meticulously painted skin tones, capturing every blemish, capillary, freckle and imperfection. The final step was to dress the sculpture with real details such as hair, clothes and props. The result is a stunning technical achievement.

Kastiff says technical skill and the ability to make "some important comments about the world" are "the two elements of a truly great artist."

"You want to learn something about life as a result of the artist's work," he says.

Hanson, he adds, was really a "revolutionary."

"When you think about sculpture, you think about Greeks, god-like figures, a general on a horseback," he says. "[Hanson] has taken the sculpture off the pedestal. That we should be looking at the cleaning lady, looking at the security guard, this helps us to value and respect the work of common people."

For the first time ever, photographs of the models are exhibited alongside Hanson's sculptures. Hanson was a prolific photographer; close to 1,000 of his pictures were found after his death. They are included in the show not because of their artistic value, but to provide insight into his process. Photographs were simply "sketches" to Hanson. Indeed, a note on the wall by New York photography critic Vicki Goldberg states: "Duane Hanson was not a great photographer and probably not even a good one."

Says Wesla: "I thought it would be interesting to the viewers to see the process, the different poses of the model, and the changes that took place before the sculpture was finished."

The photographs also show that Hanson did not simply duplicate people as he found them. According to Kastiff, Hanson, acting like a film director, chose his "actors," posed them and dressed them as he saw fit.

"I'm not duplicating life, I'm making a statement about human values," Hanson once said.

The exhibit runs through Jan. 14, when it will travel to Washington, D.C., and then Indiana. In 2007, Wesla will take Duane's brood on an international tour -- to Copenhagen, Helsinki, Germany and Hong Kong.

The folks at the Michener will be sad to see them depart, as real human affection starts to develop if you spend enough time around these figures. Officer Jack, however, might be glad when the Michener Museum goes back to exhibiting paintings. At least he can be reasonably sure no one will try to poke him in the face.

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THE DETAILS

"DUANE HANSON:

REAL LIFE'

When: Through Jan. 14

Where: James A Michener Art Museum, 138 S. Pine St., Doylestown

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tues.-Fri., 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sat., noon-5 p.m. Sun.

Admission: \$6 special exhibition fee in addition to regular admission of \$6.50; \$6, seniors; \$4, ages 6-18; free, members

Info: 215-340-9800, [www.](http://www.michenermuseum.org)

[michenermuseum.org](http://michenermuseum.org)

Related event: 1-2 p.m. Nov. 14, talk by Bruce Kastiff, director/CEO of the Michener Museum and exhibit curator. \$15; \$8 members, which includes general admission and special exhibition fee.

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